

D.C. wall display showcases key piece of Paducah history

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BY DAVID ZOELLER dzoeller@paducahsun.com



Officials celebrating the unveiling of the wall display depicting the history of the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant at the U.S. Department of Energy headquarters in Washington, D.C., are (from left): U.S. Rep. Ed Whitfield; U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell; Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz; Mayor Gayle Kaler; Clyde Elrod, who was involved in the construction of the plant; McCracken County Judge-Executive Bob Leeper; and Len Peters, Kentucky's secretary of energy and environment.

Local, state and federal officials joined in a Thursday ceremony unveiling the new wall display depicting the history of the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant at the U.S. Department of Energy's headquarters in Washington, D.C.

The unveiling was among the highlights of the Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce's annual D.C. "Fly-In," which brings a contingent of local representatives to the nation's capital to express concerns on behalf of the community. Chief among those concerns is the ongoing cleanup at the Paducah plant site.

According to Sandra Wilson, chamber president, the display on the fifth floor of the Forrestal Building will help keep Paducah on the minds of DOE officials as they pass by it each day.

"We're one of only four (DOE site) communities to have a display," Wilson said. "I'm so proud that our community has been recognized this way."

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was among the officials taking time to recognize the important role the Paducah plant played in the nation's history in the nuclear age.

"I want to thank all my friends from Paducah for making this ceremony possible, and I thank the department and Secretary (Ernest) Moniz for hosting this permanent display," McConnell said. "For generations, patriotic western Kentuckians have advanced our country's national security and energy security by never shying away from a challenge.

"By enriching uranium for national defense - and later for civilian purposes - workers at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant frequently executed dangerous tasks as they contributed to America's success in the Cold War."

McConnell said he was proud to continue the work of another Senate Majority Leader from the commonwealth, Alben Barkley, in supporting the workers and mission of the facility.

"I will continue to work - along with my colleagues in the congressional delegation - to ensure the government's long-term environmental responsibilities are met," McConnell said.

In addition to McConnell, the ceremony included remarks from Moniz; U.S. Rep. Ed Whitfield; Len Peters, Kentucky's secretary for energy and environment; and David Klaus, deputy undersecretary for management and performance at DOE. It was Klaus who, when in Paducah in March to tour the site, first mentioned the idea of the display, Wilson recalled.

"I think everyone in the DOE was blown away by it," Wilson said of the display. In addition to noting the Paducah site was the longest operating gaseous diffusion plant, Moniz talked about its future, she said.

"We felt like he was very encouraging about the department's commitment to Paducah," Wilson said. "He did talk about continuing the cleanup and about new activities at the site."

Paducah Mayor Gayle Kaler and McCracken County Judge-Executive Bob Leeper also spoke at the event. In addition, Clyde Elrod, who was involved in the construction of the plant and served as the charter president of the Paducah Area Community Reuse Organization, was recognized during the ceremony.

In her remarks, Kaler spoke of the important role the people at the plant played, Wilson said.

"She talked more about the history," Wilson said. "When those people moved into the community, they really transformed it. They brought in engineers. There was a lot of construction, a lot of housing," she said.

The culture of the community also was transformed.

"That was kind of when the symphony started, the Market House Theatre and all of that (from a cultural standpoint) started," Wilson said.